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AUTHOR Connors, G. Patrick
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ABSTRACT

Provided in this description of the differences between a strain (damage to the muscle or tendon) and a sprain (damage to the ligament) are definitions of mild, moderate, and severe (first, second, and third degree) strains and sprains. A final caution is given that these are two separate and distinct problems and should be treated as such. (DC)

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Hamilton Hospital BOX H / 1881 WHITE HORSE-HAMILTON SQUARE ROAD / TRENTON, NEW JERSEY 08690 / PHONE (609-586-7900)
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FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

Marie R. Power-Barnes, Director
Public Relations & Marketing
(609) 586-7900, ext. 6240

(by: J. Patrick Connors, A.T.,C. M.Ed.)
Program Director, Hamilton Hospital
Institute for Medicine in Sports

June 3, 1983

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN STRAIN AND SPRAIN

QUESTION: What is the difference between a sprain and strain?

ROBERT
MERCERVILLE

ANSWER: A strain or sprain is a diagnosis for various injuries related to soft tissue. A strain involves the stretching or tearing of the muscle or tendon. These structures are primarily responsible for the motion of body parts. A strain may be classified as one of the following conditions:

1st degree or mild - this results from an overuse or overstretching of the muscle or tendon. Little damage has been done. There is no loss of function, but pain does accompany active movement.

2nd degree or moderate - a larger amount of muscle or tenden tissue is separated resulting in some functional loss and a large amount of pain accompanying any active movement about the immediate area.

3rd degree or severe - a complete separation within the muscle or tendon resulting in complete functional loss; the pain is usually not as severe as a 2nd degree injury. There is an obvious deformity of the injured tendon or muscle resulting in a protrusion or bubble look around the injury site.

A sprain involves the stretching or tearing of the ligaments that surround a joint. These structures are of vital importance as they constitute the supporting structure of a joint and limit abnormal motion of a joint. A sprain may be classified as one of the three following conditions:

1st degree - a mild stretching of the ligament resulting in a partially tearing of some tissue accompanied by slight bruising, but no actual loss of function.

2nd degree - a moderate sprain with some tissue partially torn resulting in some degree of functional loss.

3rd degree - a severe sprain causes complete tearing separation of the ligament within the body of the ligament or a pulling away of the structure

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from the bone. This is accompanied by a complete loss of function. This type of sprain may require surgery.

These are two separate and distinct problems and should be treated as such. As the literature suggests, one should not treat a ligamentous sprain in the same context as one would treat a muscle tendon strain. Many times these types of injuries occur together due to the biomechanics of the accident and thus would be treated similarly in nature. However, very often they do not occur simutaneously. It is, therefore, very important for the physician to determine an exact diagnosis to allow for proper treatment protocol to be followed.

If you have any questions, comments or suggestions regarding this article or any facet of sports medicine, write to the Institute for Medicine in Sports, P.O. Box 2621, Hamilton Square, NJ 08690 or phone (609) 586-4277. If you wish to make an appointment for physicians' clinic, sports rehab/physical therapy, cardio pulmonary rehab or a consultation regarding conditioning, nutrition and/or prevention call (609) 586-7900 ext. 6677.

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